

LOCH MHIC GHILLE-CHAOILE :

A TRADITION OF THE CAIRNGORMS.

By the Rev. DONALD McDUGALL, B.D.

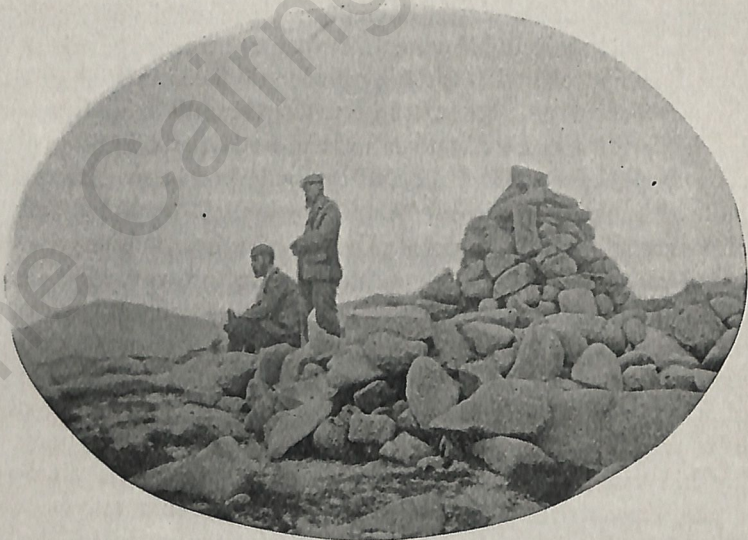
THE tourist about to ascend Braeriach, the highest, with the exception of Ben Muich Dhui, of the Cairngorm group, will probably start from Aviemore, passing by Loch an Eilein, in Rothiemurchus, on his way to Glen Eunach, whence the ascent is easily made. The most convenient point from which to ascend is near the junction of the burn which comes down from the mountain and joins the Bennie about two miles from the head of Glen Eunach. Near the confluence of these streams, and on the left bank of that which flows from Loch Eunach, is a small lake, marked on the Ordnance Survey map as bearing the somewhat peculiar name of Loch Mhic Ghille-chaoile—a Gaelic expression which literally means “the Loch of the Lanky Man’s Son”. The person here alluded to as being lean, or lanky, was in reality a tall, slender, wiry, active person, possessing these characteristics in a much greater degree than any others in the place. The son inherited the father’s physical peculiarities, with the addition that he was specially noted for his swiftness, and in feats of agility and running few could approach him. The loch here specified obtained its name, according to local tradition, from a somewhat tragic incident in which this fleet and courageous man lost his life, close by the banks of the lake.

Cattle raids were then common, and it was no unusual sight to witness Lochaber reivers passing stealthily along secluded mountain glens to escape observation, carrying off their unlawful prey to their homes in the west. A party of these raiders made their appearance in Glen Eunach on a Sunday morning, and their predatory intentions were soon disclosed to the herdsman in charge of the cattle sent to the

glen for grazing during the summer months. He at once set off to procure the necessary assistance, and went direct to the church of Rothiemurchus, where he knew most of the people would be assembled at worship. He without delay made known the unwelcome intelligence that Lochaber thieves were engaged in collecting and driving off their cattle in Glen Eunach. The service was immediately brought to a close, and most of the men present set off in pursuit. Mac Ghille-Chaoile, who had oftener than once rendered good service on similar occasions, sped across the hills to the scene of action, and was soon far ahead of the others who were bent on the same errand. He knew well the direction the thieves were likely to take, and he made all possible haste to intercept their progress before it should prove too late. By the time he crossed over into Glen Eunach he found the cattle all collected together in one spot, ready to be driven across Coire Odhar into Badenoch. He came up with the robbers at the little loch which from henceforth was destined to bear his name. Loud and angry words passed, and a scuffle immediately ensued, in which he was mortally wounded and in a few minutes expired. Dreading apprehension for the murder thus committed, and finding that as yet none of the murdered man's friends was in sight, they hurriedly took up the body, carried it to a retired spot above the loch, and concealed or buried it in a hollow, known as Coire Bo' Chraig, where it remained undiscovered for several weeks. His companions, on arriving at the place, found all their cattle safe, but no trace of their companion, or of the plundering invaders whose lawless project he had so successfully thwarted, although at the expense of his own life. After a vain search throughout the glen, they were obliged to return home without any tidings as to what had become of him. The place where the body lay hid was only found out some five or six weeks afterwards, through information given by a Lochaber woman who visited the district, and told the people the account which she had heard in the west regarding the manner of his death and the disposal of his body. The tidings, although of a sad and sorrowful character, enabled his relatives and friends

to give him decent burial in the churchyard. From that day forth, the loch where he met his fate has borne the name by which it is now known—that of “Loch Mhic Ghille-chaoile”.

It may be remarked, as tending in some measure to confirm the general truth of the story, that in recent years an old, rusty dirk, or skian-dubh, was found by the side of the loch, which, not unlikely, may have been the very weapon by which the unfortunate victim was killed, or one which he carried about his person, and had dropped on receiving his death wound. The reivers, after committing the murder, immediately decamped on concealing the body, and set out for their own country, where, to all appearance, they managed to escape the punishment which their crime deserved.



THE CAIRN, BRAERIACH.